

03
04 IN: This past summer you were in Iona, and you just explained
05 what prompted you to go there, and the resulting portraits
06 that you took.

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08 LA: I went to Iona in June, and it was part of a three-month
09 pilgrimage through Europe. I went to various kinds of reli-
10 gious communities, starting off in France, at Tesé, and then
11 Switzerland, to a small Protestant monastery, it was actual-
12 ly Protestant sisters, then I later went to the Channel Is-
13 lands, and then up to Scotland and went to Iona, which is a
14 small island in the Inner Hebrides, off the west coast of
15 Scotland, and spent two weeks there. During that time, I
16 participated in a lot of the activities at the Iona abbey,
17 which was at one time a Benedictine abbey, and then is now
18 the headquarters of what is called the Iona community, a
19 community that consists of about a hundred and forty people,
20 who are actually scattered in various parts of the world,
21 but have the abbey as their kind of spiritual headquarters,
22 and about fourteen of them actually live on the island at
23 the abbey at any given time. And the abbey receives visi-
24 tors for week-long programs, where they participate in the
25 rhythm of the life of the community. That includes going to
26 services, and they also have discussions, and you work in
27 the kitchen, and that kind of thing. I didn't stay at the
28 abbey itself, I stayed in a bed-and-breakfast place, just
29 near the pier on the island, and the reason for that was, I

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03 guess, twofold. I felt that I could still participate in
04 the activities at the abbey without actually staying there,
05 and that I would be more open to meeting islanders if I
06 stayed in the bed-and-breakfast place, because there's a
07 certain amount of, I don't know if the word is friction, but
08 a certain kind of polarity between the people involved with
09 the abbey and the islanders themselves, who are very, very
10 deeply rooted on Iona, and I think there's a certain amount
11 of resentment of the abbey people, who came in starting in
12 about the 1930's, but in any kind of rural community, if
13 your grandfather and your great-grandfather, and so on,
14 wasn't born there, then you're still considered somehow
15 strangers. So by staying at the bed-and-breakfast place,
16 also, I wasn't hooked into any kind of schedule, and I real-
17 ized after about a couple of days on the island that it
18 would be, although I was there for personal reasons, I began
19 to think in terms of a documentary project, both in terms of
20 photography and in keeping a journal, and even at that point
21 I began to envision some sort of project which would combine
22 a text with the photographs. And once I began thinking of
23 it, I didn't even photograph for the first two or three
24 days, and I remember the first photograph I did take, it was
25 in the evening, and it was beautiful, it was probably around
26 six or seven in the evening, and there was a little boy with
27 ginger-coloured hair playing in the road, and he was wearing
28 a brown sweater and brown shorts, and he had a really tradi-

03 tionally Celtic face, that reminded me so much of some of
04 Paul Strand's portraits, and his was the first portrait that
05 I took, and that got me thinking more about how I wanted to
06 study the island visually. And in a sense I did try and go
07 about it in a, I don't know if I'd call it a scientific or a
08 pseudo-scientific way, and I did think of the various acti-
09 vities and the various places on the island. It's a very
10 small island, but there are certain, fairly defined areas of
11 activity. There's the pier, for instance, where you're get-
12 ting the ferry boat coming in from the Isle of Maugh, which
13 is about a mile and a half, I think, away, and then you
14 have, there's one lobsterman, and so he has his boat at the
15 pier, and then there's smaller boats which take people on
16 tours around the Isle of Staffa and over to Maugh, and that
17 kind of thing. And then you have supplies being brought in
18 for the island. So that's some of the pier activity. And
19 then there's a little restaurant nearby, and a couple of
20 bed-and-breakfast places. So the pier was one centre, and
21 then you had the abbey, and the little chapel, St. Oran's
22 chapel, beside the abbey. That was another area of activi-
23 ty, and then you had the various crofts, or farms, around
24 the island, and then you had just the beaches and the areas
25 that were completely uninhabited. Even though it's a small
26 island, there are still stretches where you won't see anoth-
27 er person. I spent a lot of time just wandering around the
28 island, actually for hours, and would spend time just sort
29 of sitting on the beach and that kind of thing.

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04 IN: When you were photographing the people on the island, what
05 was your approach? Were they primarily people who you
06 didn't know, or you would meet someone, speak with them for
07 a certain amount of time, and then ask them if you could
08 take their photograph?

09

10 LA: Both. In some cases, I did get to know them quite well.
11 The image which became for the exhibition which I had on
12 Iona, the key image, was of a sculptor named Christopher
13 Hall, and I didn't photograph Christopher until I'd known
14 him for about a week, and I used to spend a couple of hours
15 every day just watching him as he sculpted the capitals in
16 the cloisters in the abbey, and sometimes we'd talk and
17 sometimes I would just sit there and watch him, and he was
18 working on the last capital in a series that he was doing on
19 the birds of Scotland. So I watched him, actually, from the
20 initial, from the preparatory sketches and so on, right
21 through to completion of a capital, and I started to photo-
22 graph after a few days, I don't know if it was a whole week
23 or not, and I did, in fact, do a kind of series. I thought
24 it would be nice record for him, because he had hoped that
25 his brother-in-law would actually come up and film him doing
26 this last capital, but he wasn't able to, so I did a series
27 of images as well as that one portrait that I did of him.
28 And he had been working in the abbey every summer for fif-
29 teen years. Other people, I would just meet along the road,

03 and often they would approach me, I think because it was a
04 fairly unusual sight to see a woman like myself struggling
05 along with my tripod, fairly bulky equipment, because I
06 brought my 2½ camera as well as my 35, thinking in terms of
07 architectural studies and that kind of thing, I thought I
08 would use my 2½ for that and then use my 35 for more sponta-
09 neous portraits. So oftentimes people would actually ap-
10 proach me and start asking me about what I was doing and how
11 long I was spending on the island, and I think because I
12 spent more than just a couple of hours, because a lot of
13 people just kind of wash in and out, they come over in the
14 ferry boat, go up to the abbey, go into the shop and maybe
15 buy a couple of things, and then leave again, but because I
16 was there for a while, people, I think, accepted me more
17 readily, and because, I guess, I showed an interest in the
18 history of the island, in the family histories of the people
19 I was meeting and so on, they were very, very receptive to
20 me.

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22

23 IN: What do you think are the potentials and the limitations of
24 portraiture?

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26 LA: The limitations, I suppose that the obvious limitation is
27 that in any one photograph can you really capture all the
28 facets of an individual? I think you can try to capture,
29 you try to capture the essence, I think, of the individual,

03 but obviously, at any given time, you're leaving out a lot
04 of different sides. So much is filtered through your own
05 perceptions so much that how can you ever say that that's
06 really definitive. I think to say that something is a defi-
07 nitive portrait is, I don't know if you can really say that
08 or not. I think a friend of mine, Sam Tata, often says that
09 a portrait is sixty, or even seventy, percent the photogra-
10 pher, and thirty percent the other person. I find, when I'm
11 looking back on past work done at a given time, I realize
12 how much it reflects my feelings at the time. So if I'm go-
13 ing through certain things emotionally, those things show up
14 in my work, whether it's portraits or landscapes, or what-
15 ever it is. It naturally colours the kind of work that
16 you're doing.

18

19 IN: So that essentially would be one potential of portrait work
20 for you, the fact that it becomes a memory or a trigger.

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22 LA: Yes, in that sense. Potential of portraiture, well, I think
23 the obvious things, in showing a person's character or in
24 showing him at a particular time in his life is obviously a
25 wonderful thing to be able to do.

26

27 IN: Why did you have this exhibition of portraits from Iona?
28 Did you want that material to be accessible to other peo-
29 ple? What was the idea?

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04 LA: It was very much a personal kind of sharing that I wanted to
05 do. When the Saidye Bronfman Centre approached me, Peter
06 knew that I'd taken this trip through Europe and he asked me
07 if I had photographed, and he had suggested doing something
08 on all the communities that I went to. I wanted to re-
09 strict it to Iona, primarily because I really hadn't photo-
10 graphed that much at the other communities. I think that I
11 hadn't been sure how receptive these communities would be to
12 the idea of having someone document, and I hadn't gone there
13 primarily to do that, although I'd certainly now, if I went
14 back, I would want to do that, and feel that I could do it
15 more readily because of the experience of having gone
16 through it in a very personal way. So I suggested that I
17 just restrict myself to Iona, and I thought of it as a very
18 personal kind of sharing of the experience that I had had on
19 Iona, and I think the dominant feeling of that experience
20 was a sense of peace, a sense of calm, it was a kind of re-
21 treat for me from the weary world, whatever, and I wanted to
22 be able to create that sense, both through the images, which
23 weren't, of course, just portraits, they were also land-
24 scapes and architectural studies, and through the words
25 which were drawn, were excerpted from the journal that I'd
26 kept during my trip. I wanted to re-create the experience,
27 essentially. It wasn't a documentary exhibition in the
28 sense of, well, Jeffrey James, at the conference in Freder-
29 icton, for instance, gave a definition of social documentary

03 as documentary which is working toward change of some condi-
04 tion that's alterable. And I guess it wasn't a documentary
05 in that sense, but it was a way of perhaps trying to get
06 people to pause for a moment, to think about the underpin-
07 ning of our life, the spiritual side of our life, which is
08 something that Iona is very closely connected to. It's a
09 very special place, not only in terms of Christian history,
10 but in terms of a kind of mysticism, I guess, because long
11 before St. Columba arrived there it was a centre for the
12 Druids. In fact, there's a wonderful story that's probably
13 apocryphal, that when St. Columba arrived in this leather
14 coracle, with his disciples, in 563 A.D., that he was met by
15 a Druid chief at the beach, and the Druid chief said to him,
16 have you come to take away our faith. And St. Columba said,
17 what is your faith? And the chief drew with a stick in the
18 sand a circle to represent eternity, and St. Columba said,
19 no, I've come to add to it, and he drew the cross within the
20 circle, hence the origin of the Celtic cross.

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22
23 IN: When you put the words with the photographs, do you think
24 that it increases the information that you are able to de-
25 duce from the photograph?

26
27 LA: I think it's a very tricky thing, and I'm certainly still
28 working on that, because there's always the danger of writ-
29 ing something that is self-evident in the photographs, and

03 when I set up the exhibition, I did set it up like pages in
04 a book, and I had the text always on the right-hand side, so
05 that when you went through the exhibition, if you followed
06 it the way you were supposed follow it through, you would
07 see the image first, and then read the text, because I
08 didn't want you to see the image and to have been influenced
09 by having read the text previously. I hope that it supple-
10 ments somehow the image, that it doesn't necessarily tell
11 you how to read the image, but that it gives you additional
12 information. It tells you how I felt, basically, when I was
13 working with that image.

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15
16 IN: Yes, it definitely has the quality of a personal diary, per-
17 sonal journal, not necessarily directly related, either, to
18 the image. Do you want to just give us an example of the
19 type of writing that would be included with the images.

20
21 LA: Sure. One thing I could read would be the very short intro-
22 duction. Because it was a documentary exhibition, I real-
23 ized that people knew nothing about Iona or its history, I
24 included a map at the beginning, and then I included a fair-
25 ly long text about the island itself and its history, and
26 then a shorter text explaining why I went there.

27
28 "In the spring of 1981, as part of a personal pilgrimage to
29 several religious centres in Europe, I spent two happy and

03 profoundly peaceful weeks on Iona. I attended services and
04 other activities at the Iona Abbey, talked to islanders and
05 fellow visitors, and wandered endlessly over hill and dale.
06 The text below, and accompanying my photographs, is based on
07 entries in the journal I kept during my trip.

08
09 "Iona, recollections of pilgrimage.

10
11 "I shall never forget that morning in May when I first set
12 eyes on Iona. A fierce wind whipped around me as I stood on
13 the ferry deck, but it was sunny and clear, a rarity in the
14 Hebrides. Looking back, I saw the Isle of Maugh receding in
15 the distance, and the seagulls riding the slipstream, crying
16 out raucously in delight. Looking ahead, I saw the small
17 rocky island which had prompted me to travel on innumerable
18 planes, trains, buses, and boats. I was a pilgrim at the
19 end, and the beginning, of my journey. My spirits soared.

20
21 "Two weeks passed and I boarded the ferry once more. I left
22 Iona filled with the wonder of the place and of the people I
23 had encountered: the stone-carver, the crofter, the weaver,
24 the lobsterman, clerics and laymen, residents and visitors,
25 all drawn to the same shores as St. Columba. While I took
26 one last lingering look through the drizzle, I remembered
27 what so many islanders had told me: if you've been to Iona
28 once, you'll be back three times. I felt consoled at the
29 prospect of my future return."

07 So that was the text which opened the exhibition in a more
08 personal way. And if you'd like, I could read a couple of
09 passages that accompanied portraits or whatever.

10 IN: Perhaps the one of the stonemason. Do you have that?

11 LA: I thought I had it, I'm sorry, it's not there after all.

12 IN: Okay, we'll just pick another one.

13
14 LA: Shall I describe the image to you? It's a little hard to
15 describe, I guess. I don't know if I should try and de-
16 scribe it or not, it's a bit hard to. Well, you would show
17 the image ...

18
19 Okay, this image is entitled "The North End of the Island,
20 Iona."

21
22 "Anxious to see the last rays of sun at the north end of the
23 island, I made my way through a pasture swarming with rab-
24 bbits emboldened by the approaching dusk. I came across a
25 curious gate, designed to keep the sheep from straying onto
26 the beach. It was a fanciful creation, which made use of a
27 bedspring."

28
29 "Claire in Charlotte Hall, Iona."

03 "I was enchanted with Chris Hall's daughters, Claire and
04 Charlotte. They were simply lovely. They had spent all
05 their childhood summers on Iona, and loved to ride around
06 the island on their bicycles, together, or with their young-
07 er brother, Robin. Their favourite destination was the
08 pier, where they watched the ferry loading and unloading,
09 and smaller boats departing for, or arriving from, a day's
10 fishing, or a tourist expedition to the Isle of Maugh or
11 Stafffa. It was one evening at the pier, in fact, that I had
12 the overwhelming desire to photograph the two sisters, to
13 try to convey the children they still were, and the women
14 they would become."

16

17 "Christopher Hall, Stone-Carver, Iona Abbey."

18

19 "I stood in the shadow of the cloisters and watched the
20 stone-carver chipping away at the capital with a pick and
21 claw, and smoothing the surface with the pumice. He and his
22 satchel of tools were coated with a fine layer of the sand-
23 stone dust. I timidly asked a few questions. He answered
24 patiently, even though, as I soon discovered, visitors asked
25 him the same things repeatedly. His name was Chris Hall,
26 and we struck up a friendship. Indeed, I cherished the hour
27 or two that I reserved each day to sit nearby as he worked,
28 sometimes in silence, sometimes talking with him about art,
29 life, and Christianity."

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04 IN: We talked briefly before about the lack of orientation or
05 the lack of direction that some photographers have, and you
06 talked about the need for an orientation, research, a speci-
07 fic idea behind your photographs and your writing. Can you
08 just add to that a bit?

09

10 LA: Well, I think it's probably partly because of my orientation
11 as a journalist, and the fact is that when I first started
12 to photograph, back in 1971, although it was partly as a
13 means of artistic expression, I also saw photography as an
14 adjunct for my writing, and as a journalist, obviously, you
15 have to have a very clear focus for an article or whatever
16 your writing project is. And I feel that the same thing
17 should and can be applied to photography. So that when you
18 go to do an article, obviously you do background research
19 and then you do your interviews, and so on, and then you
20 pull the whole thing together. And I think that too often
21 photographers go out and they do their work very, very intu-
22 itively, they're simply reacting to things, they're not
23 really thinking through very carefully what it is that
24 they're trying to convey. I don't think that you should be-
25 come too rigid, obviously I think that you should leave
26 yourself very open to situations that can unfold as you are
27 working in the field, but I'm trying now to develop pro-
28 jects, to really think about them before I go out and start
29 to shoot, and the one that I'm currently working on is on

03 teenage girls. And I think that was prompted, partly, by my
04 experience with Claire and Charlotte on Iona. I found that
05 age, they were about twelve and fourteen, and I felt that
06 this is a very special age, because it's really on the
07 threshold of womanhood, and it's at the age when you're
08 still a child in some ways, and yet you're still a woman,
09 and girls at that age have, I think, different degrees of
10 self-consciousness about their sexuality, and they're trying
11 out a lot of different kinds of roles and so on. And one
12 thing that I was interested in is in seeing to what degree
13 the feminist movement has had an effect on girls of this
14 age. And it seems as if it hasn't had that much of an ef-
15 fect. I think it's because girls at that age are just high-
16 ly susceptible to romantic idealism, and at that age they're
17 not very interested in the feminist movement. Even those
18 that I photographed whose mothers, for instance, are really
19 quite ardent feminists, in fact, sometimes their daughters
20 are the ones who are the most anti-feminist and feel that
21 things are just fine the way they are, and they're more in-
22 terested, at this age, in getting the attention of boys, in
23 putting on their make-up, and that kind of thing. But I
24 think it's interesting, not only to photograph them, but to
25 interview them, and I think it really does amplify the
26 images, to have the excerpts from the interviews, or, in a
27 couple of cases, from things that the girls themselves for
28 journals or for school assignments, that kind of thing.

29

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04 IN: How do you go about doing the research for this project?
0506 LA: In this case, I've been collecting articles, trying to read
07 anything I can on the subject, talking to other people
08 who've worked in the area, giving courses, or people who've
09 done other kinds of documentary projects on it. And what
10 often happens is that someone knows that you're interested
11 in it, and then they mention, well, so-and-so has done some
12 work in the States on that area or something of that kind.
13 So you go and you try and find out what you can about it.
14 And then, obviously, just going out and finding the girls
15 and interviewing them. What I usually do is try and inter-
16 view them on one occasion, and then photograph them on a
17 later occasion, although sometimes it's happened that I've
18 had to do it at the same time. But if I can interview them
19 beforehand, then I get a much better sense of who they are
20 and how I'd like to try and capture them on film. Some of
21 the girls, by the way, I have known. There's one that I had
22 photographed a couple of years ago for her parents, and we
23 got to be kind of friends at that time, and then I naturally
24 thought of her when I started to work on the project. And
25 another project that I'd worked on, that also I think was a
26 kind of background for this one, was on summer camps. And I
27 photographed, particularly, at Camp Oolowan, which is the
28 YWCA camp, because I've been on the Board of Directors of
29 the YW for three years, and I've been on the camp committee,

03 so every summer I've gone up to camp and photographed, and,
04 again, have been particularly drawn to girls of that age.
05 So that was another reason, I think, that I wanted to devel-
06 op this project.

07
08

09 IN: Is there information which is revealed by the photographs
10 which might increase your understanding about adolescent fe-
11 males?

12

13 LA: I think so, because one thing that I began to notice, and
14 I've really just started the project, but it almost bothered
15 me, at first, that I seemed to be getting romantic kind of
16 images. Not quite David Hamilton, but somewhere along those
17 lines. And then I realized it's often because that's what
18 the girls are projecting. They have a tendency to, the way
19 they hold their bodies and so on, in some cases they hold
20 themselves quite awkwardly, but in other cases they have a
21 way of kind of curling up like cats, which is actually quite
22 sensual, although the couple that I'm thinking of who did
23 that are quite unaware, I think, of how really sensual they
24 are. But all these things were coming through in the images
25 almost against my will, or I felt, why am I getting these
26 very romanticized-looking images, and that's that the girls
27 were projecting. So, yes, I think it is saying something
28 about that whole age.

29

03
04 IN: Does it concur with the information that you get in the in-
05 terviews, or is it in contradiction?
06

07 LA: No, it usually does in fact concur. What they talk about,
08 in terms of their expectations of marriage and that kind of
09 thing, and then the whole of phenomenon of best friends,
10 that comes out almost always in the interviews, and in one
11 case I photographed the two girls who are best friends, and
12 they talk about each other in the interviews.
13

14 IN: Is this a long-term project?
15

16 LA: It is, it's an ongoing project, it's something that, when-
17 ever I have a chance, whenever I meet a new girl or hear
18 about one, then I'll keep plugging away at it. Because I
19 have to earn my living at other kinds of work, it's some-
20 thing that I have to kind of tuck in on the side. That's
21 something, I think, that a lot of photographers have to con-
22 tend with, that unless we have a grant, then we have to do
23 these things when we can.
24

25 IN: Do you tend to work in projects?
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27 LA: I prefer to, I think, work in projects. I guess I did less
28 of that when I was younger, but now somehow I like to have
29 that kind of coherence to a project, rather than just taking

03 random individual images, although certainly if one comes
04 up, if I see something, I'm not going to pass by it just be-
05 cause it's not part of a project that I'm working on, be-
06 cause it might become part of another project. I'm just
07 thinking, for instance, of the St. Patrick's Day parade. I
08 went this year, and I think I only did one portrait during
09 the parade, I just spent half an hour or something walking
10 along, because I've gone to the parade almost every year,
11 and photographed every year, and at some point I may actual-
12 ly have enough photographs to actually put together a
13 project on the St. Patrick's Day parade. So just out of the
14 more or less random photographs that I've taken through the
15 years of the parade.

16
17
18 IN: Portraits tend to manifest themselves in all the projects,
19 and go from the black and white work to polaroids. Do you
20 notice a shift in the type of work that you do in the two
21 different formats?

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23 LA: In colour and black and white, or you mean specifically in
24 polaroid, which is a very different kind of medium. Well, I
25 worked with polaroid when I took the polaroid workshop in
26 Arles in 1979, and I think that the thing that I liked
27 best about it was being able to give the person one of the
28 images right away, and to, in a sense, work with the person,
29 who could see the kind of images that I was producing, be-

03 cause I would take several polaroids, usually, before I came
04 up with the one that I really liked, simply because you have
05 to make all these adjustments in terms of exposures and so
06 on, but also because you can see, it's like sketching, real-
07 ly, and then you can come up with the final product and you
08 have the sketches right there, you don't have to wait at
09 all. Surprisingly, I think, considering it is such a dif-
10 ferent medium, although they're in colour I think that the
11 polaroid portraits don't differ all that much from the black
12 and white ones. And the reason that portraiture is so pre-
13 dominant in my work is, I think, because I have a passion
14 for people, and that's something that emerged after a couple
15 of years of photographing, because initially I was rather
16 shy about photographing people, I felt quite self-conscious
17 about using my camera with people, and when I first started
18 to photography out at the Banff Centre in 1971, and way back
19 in '72, I was photographing nature primarily. But once I
20 started to photograph people I never looked back, so to
21 speak.

22

23
24 IN: Okay, I have one last question. Can you identify a photo-
25 grapher in Quebec whose work you respect, whose work you
26 think is important?

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28 LA: Well, I think there's more than one in Quebec. Someone
29 who's a personal friend, whose work I admired even before I

03 had met him, is Gabor Szilasi. I guess he works in some-
04 what, he works with large format and so on, but I think
05 there's some kind of underlying philosophy that I feel would
06 be somewhat the same as mine. I really hate to single some-
07 one out because there are others as well, people like Sam
08 Tata, whose work I admire, and younger photographers who are
09 working now, too. So that's a tough question.

11